

**Reading *Mein Kampf* in Tehran:
The Death of Demjanjuk and the Power of the Past
Parashat Vayikra; March 23, 2012**

It was a great shock, the first time I heard the word used properly. It was, in fact, in this week's portion, in one English translation of the text. And there, in the first chapter of Leviticus, the Hebrew term *olah* was referred to in the following way: "and when it comes to the Holocaust offering..."

A holocaust offering. What a term! And yet, actually, according to Webster's, the first usage of the terms is "a sacrifice, consumed by fire." The Latin *holocaustum* derives from the Greek *holokauston*, from *hol* (meaning "whole") and *kaustos* (meaning "burnt," related to the English word "caustic," for something that burns or stings.) Synonyms of the word "holocaust" are "conflagration, fire, inferno."

Shocked as I was to see the word in this context, the word – and associations with it – are used for shock value or overblown comparison all the time. I believe that the frequency with which we resort to such imagery distracts from appropriate analysis of other events, devalues history and debases the memory of the victims and survivors alike. But we will return to that topic in a few minutes.

Every usage of the comparison carries its own complications. The most prominent recent example, I believe, was Prime Minister Netanyahu's evocation of Holocaust imagery at the AIPAC conference two weeks ago. He knew he was

on thin ice: he actually said the words that “Iran is not Germany, and 2012 is not 1939,” or an explicit disclaimer very close to that. But that did not prevent him from comparing an attack on Iran to the Allies rejection of a proposed attack on the rail lines leading to Auschwitz. And once you make such a comparison, what moral wiggle room to you have left? On the other hand – and I will return to this as well – what if the issue of Iran and the threat it poses to the Jewish people *is* the first, or perhaps the second, actually appropriate point of real comparison to Nazi Germany in the time since World War Two?

It may be necessary, and it *may* be appropriate, but this is a dangerous game of words we play. The power of the past is vast, but imprecise in its lessons and misty in its memory. I read a chilling short story in the past few days, by the brilliant young writer Nathan Englander, called “Camp Sundown,” about a group of survivors at an Elderhostel who take law and morality into their own hands when they are convinced that a fellow – Jewish – “camper” was actually a Ukrainian guard in a Nazi death camp.

Is he? Was he? Where is truth, and where is fantasy? Englander’s piece is barely fiction: it is ripped out of the headlines in the sordid story of John Demjanjuk.

Demjanjuk, for those of you not familiar with him, was a Ukrainian man drafted into the Soviet army during World War Two, who was captured by the Germans and then, probably, put to work as a guard in several concentration

camps. He was identified by survivors as the infamous and cruel “Ivan the terrible,” for which accusation he was stripped of his United States citizenship and extradited to Israel in the early 1980’s to stand trial for crimes against humanity.

I was at the trial in Jerusalem. I spent three days there, listening through headsets to the simultaneous translations of at least four different languages. It was one of the most... disturbing experiences of my life.

The man in the chair made repeated – and shifting – claims about who we was, and what he had done. The prosecution calmly, methodically, systematically tore every one of his stories to shreds. There is no way – no way – that John Demjanjuk is who *he* says he was. He was convicted of being Ivan the Terrible, and sentenced to death in what would have been only the second judicial execution in the history of the state of Israel.

And yet, and yet. A few years later new information came to light. Listen carefully, to what it said, and what it did not say! The new information cast a slight hint of possible doubt... not a lot, but a little bit of a question ... about whether he was, in fact, Ivan the Terrible. He certainly was not who he said he was. But was he, did they *prove*, the prosecutors... that he was who *they* said he was. Incredibly, in one of the strongest testimonials to the high-minded functioning of a democracy the way it should work, the conviction was overturned, and a man who is without doubt a Nazi war criminal... was set

free, and sent back to the United States, because, well, in capital cases, you just *have to be* right.

But Demjanjuk's story was not done. A few years after that he was deported again, this time to Germany where, old, frail, still in denial, he was convicted once again, this time as accessory to the murder of 27,900 Jews while a guard at the Sobibor concentration camp. He was... free, in Germany, while appealing the conviction, when he passed away last week.

A phrase from an Israeli movie comes to mind. The movie is called *Lalechet Al HaMayim (Walk on Water)*, and it is a tale of revenge and redemption more powerful than *Munich*, and better written. It involves a Mossad agent assigned to track down a very aged Nazi rumored to be alive, but barely, and the agent, whose family is from Germany originally, tells his handler, also from Germany, to just let it go. The man is on the verge of death. And the handler pounds his fist on the table and declares his desire... "*l'hadkim et Elohim,*" to, well, basically, to get to him before God does. Well, God got Demjanjuk first, I suppose.

How do we look at history? How do we paint the past? Pesach approaches, and we know there are dozens of *haggadot* to choose from, each with its own angle, each telling the story from a particular perspective. Look, if you will, at the way we portray the Holocaust. The United States Holocaust museum, picturing the slaughter in the context of inhumanity, almost a universal story, one tale among others. Vad VaShem in Jerusalem, originally,

to salve the psyche of action-oriented Israelis, devoting a huge section of its hallways to the resistance; now, redone, the tortured dark pathways end on a vista of red-tiled villages and the sun shining on the living, breathing Judean countryside. No more powerful testimony to survival, rebuilding, victory and the imperative of Israel could possibly exist; no words needed for *that* message. Each presentation of the same story, spun by the psychic needs and cultural imperatives of those who tell the tale.

This Sunday night, as we reach the point in our Confirmation curriculum where we discuss antisemitism and the Shoah, I will end by asking our Tenth Graders something, a question I will preview for them tonight. So which is it, do you think? Is it one more example, one in a long list of terribly inhumanity, testimony to the destructive potential and real evil that lurks buried beneath a veneer of civilization, the dark shadow of the human spirit? Or was there something... not only unique, but, shall we say, uniquely unique about the Shoah, something so different from other mass murder that it stands out, and sits apart, the worst moment in all of history? (And, by the way: the general presentation and discussion I will lead with them, on the topic of antisemitism, is material I still use from one of the best history professors I ever had, the preeminent historian of the Reform movement, Dr. Michael Meyer who, as you will hear during the announcement, will be with us this coming Thursday night, for an important presentation about Nazi Germany and Jewish identity under Nazi rule.) And, at some level, and in particular ways, while I can argue the case either way... I do believe... for reasons I will go into in other settings...

I do believe that the Shoah represents the nadir of history, a point in the human story so low that it stands, in important ways, absolutely alone.

Alone, but with echoes backwards and, to our sorrow, forward in time as well. And so we return, at last, to the world of today, to reading *Mein Kampf* in Tehran. What moment is it now? It is not the 1930's, just by the very fact, as the Prime Minister implied, that there is an Israel now, and a, well, let's be blunt, an ability to hit back. Is it, then, akin to May of 1967, as the world held its breath, and Nasser promised to throw the Jews into the sea? But that is a dangerous analogy too: at what point do you hit first, and should wisdom, or fear, that guides our steps?

They say, in Israel, about Iran, that those who know don't talk, and those who talk, don't know. As to the use of history, here we face an adversary who denies the past but seeks the same outcome... and the means to bring it about. It is not the 1930's. But the echoes... the echoes are pretty strong.

Three things I would take away, from our obligations of today. Two of these things I have been addressing tonight, and one additional item I will put on our seder plate, as it were, for the near future. Three things: Vigilance, Justice, and Honor.

Vigilance. Never Again. That whether the analogy between yesterday and today is exact or not, this is a very real threat, and it is a time of great tension. We are at a crossroad, and the status quo cannot hold. But sometimes unexpected good comes out of the strangest place, and this past

week, an Israeli facebook group Israel Hearts Iran is drawing responses, facebook to facebook, person to person.

Justice. That we should never forget. Demjanjuk is dead, but there are a scattered few others who remain. For crimes against humanity, there is no statute of limitations.

And Honor. To bind up our wounds. Here, I speak not about revenge, but responsibility. For there is, in our midst, another shock... the poverty and desperate conditions into which some survivors have slipped, in Israel and, indeed, even here in our own community. In the days to come, and leading up to Yom HaShoah, we will join together with a community effort to publicize the plight of these survivors, and address what are their final needs.

Pesach. Yom HaShoah. Yom HaAtzmaut. The annual powerpoint presentation of Jewish history, ancient and modern, is about to begin, once again. From slavery to freedom, from degradation to glory. We have suffered grave losses along the way, and we pause in sadness and memory. But for those of us who are still here, and for the collective consciousness and inner will of a people who have left all of our enemies behind, one generation at a time... there are moments of celebration as well. To protect and serve, to remember and respond... An ancient story still unfolds. And now... it's our turn, now.

Shabbat Shalom.